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ABSTRACT

A technique sometimes known as patterned prose or case book exposition is an effective way to improve student writing while also holding their interest. It may also help solve a problem pointed to by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP): students' inability to think about what they read. The technique is simple. The teacher chooses the question, provides the information, and specifies the forms of the students' persuasive essays. First students are given an information sheet with a question and a series of quotations from authorities, some positive and some negative. Next they are presented with a model essay whose various parts--title, thesis, evidence, transitions, and conclusion--are outlined in the left margin. Students then write essays based on this model, refining the process as they progress. This kind of activity is as old as the western university: "quaestiones disputatae" have worked for 700 years, which is a good reason to try them again. The "Congressional Digest" and "The Reference Shelf" are good information resources for this technique. (JL)

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A TECHNIQUE FOR TEACHING EXPOSITION:

MEDIEVAL AND MODERN

Eight months ago I read the very disheartening report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress on reading, thinking, and writing skills among American high school students. Since this assessment is almost universally recognized as the most accurate study of its kind in America, I was especially dismayed to hear its conclusion: although most students read materials at their own age level, their skill in handling what they read has declined severely since the last testing in 1975. They have greater difficulty in analyzing, interpreting, and even explaining what they have read. In addition, many students "have not learned how to look for evidence for their judgments in a systematic fashion." This news was even more disheartening since it confirms what I have noticed over the ten years I have been teaching composition: college freshmen are having more and more difficulty learning the very thing I am hired to teach, exposition, the marshalling of facts to support opinions. I resolved to find ways to fight this trend. I began by reexamining a very old technique for teaching students to write expository prose. Actually many teachers use this technique at one time or another, perhaps under one of its many names--patterned prose, case book exposition--or under no name at all. So this version is only one of dozens which teachers have found useful over the years and, as we will see, the centuries.

The technique is simple. The students write a persuasive essay on a question I've chosen, using information I've provided, in a form I've specified.

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First I give the students a sheet with a question at the top, in this case, "Should soft drink and beer companies be required to pay five cents for bottles and cans returned?" Below the question is a series of quotations from authorities and documented facts relevant to the question. Some of the information tends to support an affirmative answer, some a negative answer, and some can be used to bolster arguments on either side, depending on how one analyzes them (see Handout I).

I explain to the students that each of them will decide which way he wants to answer the question, and then write an essay using some of the information to support his opinion. I also emphasize that, although I require them to use some of the factual information provided, they can also use personal experience as evidence.

Next, I give the students a model essay which is outlined in the left margin (see Handout II). I explain that, although their essays will each be different, every essay will contain all of these parts listed in the outline as they appear.

The basic parts are obvious and do not require (or exclude) originality. Each essay has a title, which can be (and usually is) the question. Each has a thesis, easily formed by turning the question into a statement, though often students go on to qualify the statement, a refinement I encourage, of course. And each has a conclusion paragraph, generally a restatement of the thesis.

Moreover, each paragraph of the body is also highly structured, as the sample essay shows, and it is in constructing these paragraphs that the students learn (or practice) that most basic and most difficult business of exposition: marshalling facts to make a point. Though concise, coherent exposition is complex and painful to write, I explain that "it's as easy as one, two, three." As the outline indicates, each paragraph consists of three parts: 1) a topic sentence,

2) some supporting information (either from the information sheet, documented in parentheses afterwards, or from personal experience), and 3) a sentence or two of explanation to show how the information supports the thesis.

Finally, once the essay has a title, thesis, body, and conclusion, I require one last bit of structure, the transitions. Again the procedure is simple, even mechanical. The student merely goes to a list of transitional words and expressions (check the index of any handbook) and picks out one to put in front of each paragraph except the first. "In the first place. . . In the second place . . . In conclusion" will do the job adequately (some of the greatest writers used these very ones), and the student has added that last professional touch.

Of course, after writing three or four highly structured essays in this form, it is possible to vary the pattern, to add such refinements as paragraphs which answer objections, give background information, or narrate personal experiences or "case studies." And in time (say the fifth or sixth essay), the students are required to begin finding facts on their own, in preparation for genuine research paper writing. But as an introduction to this difficult business of exposition, I have found the technique held their interest and improved their writing. The students quickly gain confidence because they can, in an hour or two, produce an essay that clearly makes and supports a point, a point which is an issue in their society, albeit a limited and, to some, trivial issue. In the process they have learned to document, to handle quotations in various ways, and, most importantly, to argue a case, to read information, digest it, analyze it, interpret it, put it to some use. And in doing this, they perhaps begin to overcome that central difficulty which the National Assessment pointed to: an inability to think about what they read.

If I may digress a moment, it must be clear to many by now that this technique is extremely old, as old as the Western university itself. From the founding

of the first universities and great cathedral schools in Europe in the twelfth century, the major pedagogical device was the debating of quaestiones disputatae, formal topics, usually in theology or canon law, which the professors assigned once every two weeks. The students researched the question, formed an opinion, then wrote an oration (or thesis) which was presented to the professor and, often, the whole class (in Latin, of course).

To research these questions, students had something which corresponded to the information sheets. Great scholars compiled quotations from the Bible and other authorities called "books of sentences" (from which we get our word "sententious"). They were arranged according to topics for the students' convenience. The most famous one, Peter Lombard's Four Books of Sentences, poses a problem (quaestio) and then cites arguments for and against from classical, patristic, and medieval (even contemporary) authorities. These books were, of course, extremely influential, as was the whole disputatio method which trained the likes of Peter Abelard, Thomas Aquinas, Erasmus, and a plethora of others during the six centuries the "sentences" and the disputation method were the cornerstone of education.

Moreover, a standard form was also used by these medieval and, later, Renaissance scholars. The form I have given my students to use is a very crude imitation of the form their predecessors used 700 years ago, a form refined and expanded in the Renaissance. We know it today as the classical oration, the form employed in Sidney's Defence of Poetry, Erasmus's Praise of Folly, and a host of other classics of Western literature. Since so many students and teachers over the centuries have found this method of exposition effective, I thought it might be worth renovating.

In conclusion, I hope that this very old--and constantly new--technique will be of some use to those of us who, unfortunately, don't have the time to lead each individual student through a topic of his own choosing. I've been pleased

with the results of it, overall, especially for beginning students who need a good deal of structure before they launch off on their own writing projects.

Note: Two reference works which are particularly helpful in making information sheets are Congressional Digest, a monthly magazine which takes one issue and excerpts testimony from members of Congress and witnesses at congressional hearings, and The Reference Shelf, a series of books which publish excerpts from articles on a single issue. Also, many magazines contain "forum" pages consisting of articles on opposite sides of an issue, which may provide good information for quaestiones disputatae.

HANDOUT I: INFORMATION SHEET

INSTRUCTIONS: Write a 300 to 500 word essay on the following question using some of the information provided. (You may also use examples from your own personal experience to support your opinion.) Your essay should include 1) a thesis paragraph stating your opinion on the question, 2) at least two paragraphs to support your opinion, 3) transitions between paragraphs, and 4) a conclusion paragraph.

QUESTION: SHOULD SOFT DRINK AND BEER COMPANIES BE REQUIRED BY LAW TO PAY FIVE CENTS FOR CANS AND BOTTLES RETURNED?

"Some 4.1 billion containers were littered in 1975 alone." Senator Edward Brooke of Massachusetts, Congressional Digest, March '78, p. 74.

"Between 55 and 70 per cent of all roadside litter is bottles, cans, and flip tops." Brooke, Congressional, p. 74.

"Each day we use the equivalent of 5 million gallons of gasoline to produce new containers." Federal Reserve Board Study, Congressional, p. 76.

"Oregon, which has such a law, found its beverage container litter decreased by 83%, while popular approval for the new law has reached an astonishing 91% in public opinion polls." Brooke, Congressional, p. 76.

"It is predicted that a net gain of between 80,000 and 118,000 jobs by 1982 . . . would result if this bill becomes law nationwide." Federal Energy Administration report (1977), Congressional, p. 82.

"In Oregon, the Owens-Illinois plant in Portland had ten forming machines before the bottle law went into effect in January. In February . . . two of the machines, representing 50 jobs each, had been removed, and two more were idled." President of the Local 112 of the Glass Bottle Blowers Association, Congressional, p. 75.

"In Oregon 450 jobs were lost." Congressman William J. Hughes, New Jersey, Congressional, p. 75.

"States without the deposit law are recycling between 55 and 70 per cent of the aluminum used for cans." Robert F. Testin, Environmental Planning Department, Reynolds Aluminum Company, Congressional, p. 85.

"Since 1970 bottle and can deposit laws have been rejected in ten of the thirteen elections where the question was put to people on the state and local level." Hughes, Congressional, p. 77.

"Simply stated, we are opposed to mandatory deposit legislation for beverage containers because we are convinced that it would bring about too slight a benefit at too high a cost." John J. Sheehan, director, United Steelworkers of America, Congressional, p. 79.

HANDOUT II: SAMPLE ESSAY

title

AGAINST A DEPOSIT LAW

thesis

I am convinced that soft drink and beer companies should not be required by law to pay five cents for cans and bottles returned. Such a law would not only cause a great economic loss to the nation, but it would also be unnecessary since voluntary recycling programs are already doing the job adequately--without government regulation and interference.

transition topic sentence

In the first place, a deposit law would cost our ailing economy millions of dollars in lost jobs for workers in the bottle and can industry.

evidence (indirect quote)

In Oregon a deposit law was passed recently, and according to the president of Local 112 of the Glass and Bottle Blowers Association, at least one hundred workers immediately lost their jobs at a Portland bottle factory (Congressional Digest, March, 1978, p. 75).

evidence (direct quote)

Moreover, as Congressman William J. Hughes of New Jersey points out, "In Oregon 450 jobs were lost" (Congressional, page 75).

explanation

These lost jobs--and the hardship they impose on families and communities--would be multiplied many times across this nation if deposit laws were passed in other states, putting a strain on an economy already fighting a rising unemployment rate.

transition topic sentence

In the second place, this proposed law would be a completely unnecessary burden.

evidence (direct quote)

According to Robert F. Testin of the Reynolds Aluminum Company, "States without the deposit law are already recycling between 55 and 70 per cent of aluminum used for cans"

explanation (Congressional, page 85). This statistic clearly shows that people are willing to return cans without government forcing them to.

transition Finally, the American people are against these deposit laws, laws which they realize will not bring the benefits their sponsors naively

evidence (direct quote) promise. "Since 1970 bottle and can deposit laws have been rejected in ten of the thirteen elections where the question was put to people on the state and local level," writes Congressman Hughes (Congressional,

explanation page 77). Thus, the people have freely and clearly spoken out against deposit laws, a warning legislators should heed.

transition The conclusion is clear: deposit laws are costly, unnecessary and unpopular. They should, therefore, be rejected. We should all join

conclusion paragraph to stop their spread. John J. Sheehan, president of the United Steelworkers Union, puts the case well. He, like so many others, is "convinced that it would bring about too slight a benefit at too high a cost" (Congressional, page 79).